Leading the Multiethnic School: Research Evidence on Successful Practice

by Allan Walker and Clive Dimmock

Abstract

This article reports findings from a study of principals in five multiethnic schools in England. Findings are presented in terms of the major priorities or values held by the principals, the strategies they instituted to bring their priorities to life, and some of the challenges they continue to face in this endeavor. The principals involved believed that they could make a difference in their schools and were proactive, but at the same time, realistic about what could be achieved. They distinguished themselves by aggressively tackling disadvantages related to ethnicity, racism, culture, and poverty.

An increasing number of students from diverse cultural and ethnic minority backgrounds stand at the forefront of educational, social, and political policies across many societies (Banks and Banks 2003). How to most effectively meet the needs of such students and their communities continues to be among the most serious and pressing issues facing educators worldwide. Rather than coming closer to a solution, the challenges confronting schools are becoming even more complex as global, national, and local demographics create new political, economic, and social circumstances (Gardner 2001). The challenges accompanying the education of diverse groups and ways to provide worthwhile, socially responsible, and equitable education are both exhilarating and alarming. They are exhilarating in that they have the potential to add vibrancy and richness to our schools and reinforce the need for a more equitable society. The challenges are alarming because despite ongoing efforts, change agents continue to confront prejudice, injustice, and historical misconceptions that are so profoundly entrenched in the fabric of societies and systems that they often appear insurmountable.

The challenges of educating diverse groups of multiethnic students are not confined to national or societal boundaries. Educators internationally face common, though differently shaped, issues at various stages. For example, Singaporean schools consciously have structured themselves to battle racism and advance educational opportunities for Indian, Malayan, Chinese, and Eurasian students. Australian, American, British, and New Zealand schools continue to battle institutionalized racism and endemic underachievement of indigenous groups and other ethnic minorities. The real work of designing and implementing meaningful programs for minority students has fallen squarely on the shoulders of teachers, mid-level school leaders, parents, school support staff, and principals, often in partnership with various formal and informal community support and interest groups.

The challenges accompanying the education of diverse groups and ways to provide worthwhile, socially responsible, and equitable education are both exhilarating and alarming.

This article focuses on principals in schools with substantial numbers of minority ethnic students. The study is based on data collected from elementary and secondary school principals of five schools in the United Kingdom and draws on data from a larger, broader study conducted by the Centre for Educational Leadership and Management (CELM 2004a; 2004b). While the CELM study collected perceptions from a range of school leaders, teachers, students, and community members, this paper draws only on principals' perceptions. Data were collected primarily through semistructured interviews and supported by analyses of school documentation and statistical data related to the ethnic composition of the schools. Interviews were recorded and analyzed to identify common themes and issues. Following data analysis, emerging themes and issues were identified and discussed with a reference group.

The principals involved in the study had established reputations as good leaders of multiethnic schools. The aims of the research were to elicit their perspectives on issues related to leading multiethnic schools, to identify priorities and effective practices in school leadership, and to specify the challenges associated with exercising effective leadership.

Principals as Proactive Leaders

The tendency to locate the blame for underachievement in students and their communities overlooks the role of schools as institutions, and teachers and principals as leaders, in processes that lead to poor student performance (Blair 2002, 182).

The principals involved in the study clearly articulated their commitment to attacking ingrained societal inequalities, particularly racism and poverty, because of their inexorable link to student achievement. These school leaders did not rest on the rhetoric of their values and beliefs, but expended considerable strategic and practical energy toward their realization—often in the face of daunting obstacles. The principals were proactive in anticipating future problems, needs, or changes based on what the school could do to equalize opportunities for students. Despite powerful constraints, they believed that they could make a difference and improve race relations.

The principals' beliefs and strategic intentions showed that they recognized what Banks (1994) labeled *cultural difference* rather than *cultural deficit*. Cultural deficit is the notion that students from minority ethnic groups often fail in school because of the culture in which they are raised, not the culture of the school. This thinking leads to isolated action and does not target the school as the unit of change. Conversely, cultural difference assumes that ethnic minority students often fail because they have different values than those of the school—not because they are culturally deficient. Schools making this assumption implement changes that encourage respect for all cultures and institute strategies consistent with the students' cultural characteristics (Minnesota Independent School Forum 2001).

The proactive demeanor of the principals in the study is indicative of five common, interrelated forms of leadership style.
- They held strong, equity-focused values and were aggressive in communicating these inside and outside of school boundaries. These values drove their educational careers and personal lives, and became a major factor in their constant and forceful messaging.
- They regularly reflected upon these values and applied them practically as strategies in their schools and the broader community.
- The principals worked actively to shape policy and vigorously sought to build synergy in their schools. Their priorities included promoting equality and inclusion.
- These leaders had an almost unshakable belief that they could and would make a positive difference in the immediate lives and learning of their students and allay the disadvantages and inequalities often attached to ethnicity and racism. Despite considerable opposition, they generally were positive people.
- The principals were realists. They emphasized that schools, communities, ethnic groups, and positions within given ethnic groups vary—often to a significant degree.

Priorities, Strategies, and Challenges
The work of these principals was based on their priorities, strategies, and the challenges they faced. These findings reflect the principals' predisposition to take a proactive approach to school leadership.
- *Priorities* refer to the values, beliefs, and principles that the principals sought to embed in the life and operation of their schools. These priorities represented

the nonnegotiable or fundamental ideologies that guided their attempts to address social justice issues in their schools.

- *Strategies* refer to the concrete ways through which the principals met their priorities. A variety of strategies were adopted in line with school micro-contexts.
- *Challenges* are tensions or dilemmas faced by the principals as they pursued their complex agendas. These challenges often resulted from contradictory expectations between government policy and principal priorities, academic and social agendas, and personal and group goals.

Priorities and Strategies

The principals' values-driven priorities can be grouped into six interrelated statements that align with features of successful multiethnic schools. According to Scheurich and Skrla (2003, 100), "The most important characteristics of a leader who is creating or who is going to create an equitable and excellent school is that this person has developed a strong ethical or moral core focused on equity and excellence as the only right choice for schools in a democracy. For this person, this is an indomitable belief, an indomitable commitment." Their strategies for meeting each priority are explained.

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Priority: Demanding that staff members' values cohere with principles of social justice and equality.

These school leaders were genuinely committed to the principles of social justice and to actively redressing inequality at all levels. All staff members were expected to hold similar beliefs. As one principal stated, "I think the key quality is being prepared to stand up for what you believe is right in human justice terms. . . . If you're not committed to that type of belief, I don't believe you can work in any school, but you certainly can't work in this school."

Strategies

The principals clearly and regularly articulated that the school should support a social justice agenda and stressed that these values should drive school relationships and actions. They moved beyond the "rhetorical" by link-

ing this priority to practical school activities such as mission development, improvement plans, teaching, and planning. Though embedding values coherence among staff members created constraints, the principals were unapologetic about their quest and its importance to school success.

A proactive approach to social justice required addressing the subtly embedded causes of ethnic conflict, not simply its visible indicators. The principals openly recognized the interrelatedness of such conflict in the school and community. They understood that conflict is multilayered, mirroring Henze's (2000) finding in the United States that effective school leaders viewed conflicts on a continuum. In Henze's (2000, 2) words, "The most overt conflicts, such as physical fights and racial slurs, are at one end; underlying conflicts and tensions, such as avoidance of certain groups and perceptions of unequal treatment, are in the middle. At the other end are the root causes of ethnic/racial conflicts, including segregation, racism, and inequality—conditions endemic to the larger society." Purposeful strategies challenged staff members' worldviews and focused attention on the need for social justice to be reflected across school life.

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Priority: Insisting that staff members demonstrate a willingness to understand the cultures and background realities of their students and school community.

The principals worked to understand their students' beliefs and values, and to appreciate reality through their eyes. They robustly promoted this ideology among staff members and the wider community, particularly in schools with several different ethnic minorities. Principals constantly reminded staff members to reference their work within the unique context of their school.

Strategies

Principals encouraged staff members to view the school and society through the eyes of their students and the communities they served. They believed that the meanings students attached to the world are fashioned by their culture and place in society. The principals helped staff members to see, for example, that refugee children often carried memories of harrowing experiences from their home countries and the traumatic journeys they had sometimes undertaken. Likewise, they pointed out that some Muslim students had different interpretations of the events surrounding September 11 than other ethnic groups.

Priority: Recruiting and retaining staff members with cultural and ethnic backgrounds similar to those present in the school community.

These principals believed that it was important for staff members' profiles, as much as possible, to parallel the ethnic profile of the school. They placed a high priority on the recruitment and development of staff members who could serve as positive role models and who had the cultural knowledge that comes only from living inside, or close to, a culture. This balanced profile of staff members also was seen as a means to openly express the school's dedication to its students and the community.

Strategies

The principals went to considerable lengths to ensure that the profile of teaching and nonteaching staff members reflected the ethnic profile of the school community. In many cases, this was a difficult task. Simply recruiting enough staff members, especially senior staff members—let alone staff members of certain ethnicities—was a problem given the schools' challenging urban locations. However, the principals actively—even aggressively—tried to recruit qualified and experienced teachers from appropriate ethnic minorities.

> Their aim was to advance the school, redress the disadvantages associated with ethnicity and class, and in the process, improve the lot and place of all their students.

This approach often met with minimal success; therefore, the principals turned to a home-grown approach. This involved identifying potential future teachers, involving them in nonteaching roles, and then nurturing them toward qualified teacher status. Increasing the number of ethnic minorities in support roles was another way these leaders tried to achieve a more balanced profile. Another long-term strategy for retaining and attracting staff members of different ethnic backgrounds was to openly value and reward their involvement and contributions.

The principals in the study also placed a premium on professional learning and career development opportunities in an effort to build an inclusive school culture—one where staff members could make sense of what they were doing, both in social justice and academic terms. These principals did not underestimate the difficulties of hiring and retaining the right staff members and realized the need to approach the exercise in an astute and positive way.

Priority: Positioning the school firmly within the immediate and broader societal context.

These principals recognized that their schools could not be successful if they operated in a vacuum. They stressed the importance of understanding and connecting with

the broader community and realized that the unique blend of local circumstances markedly influenced their leadership and the culture of the school. The principals felt that working beyond the school was essential to student achievement.
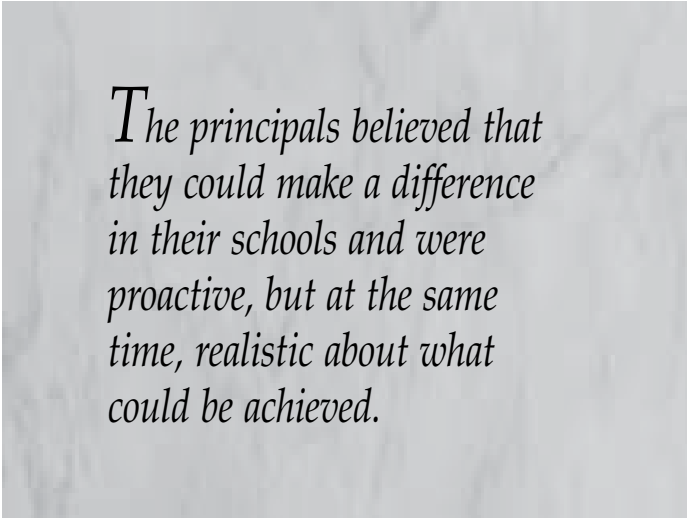
Strategies

The extended communities with which the school interacted included those directly associated with the students and the various social, social service, and community groups that had meaningful places in their lives. Strategies for locating the school within its context involved inviting parents and other community groups into the school and using the environment as a learning resource. This was considered vital to a school's ability to make a difference in their students' lives and learning.

Moving outside school boundaries was important for the principals and all staff members. This external connection demonstrated the principals' commitment to the students and their circumstances and allowed them to better ground their leadership in the contexts of their students. Similarly, moving into the community allowed staff members to understand more fully the cultural heritage of their students and to be aware of and sensitive to community concerns and aspirations.

The principals believed that they could make a difference in their schools and were proactive, but at the same time, realistic about what could be achieved.

By building coherent values within the school and locating them in the broader community, the principals attempted to increase leadership density grounded in shared ownership and responsibility. Henze's (2000, 3) description of principals in the United States succinctly captured these actions: "This [involving multiple people and ethnic groups] paved the way for more diverse leaders to take on formal leadership roles in the future, and ensured that efforts to improve human relations were not 'owned' by any one individual or group. Thus, they had a greater likelihood of being sustained."

Locating the school within the wider community consumed considerable time and resources, but was nonnegotiable in terms of making schools meaningful places for minority students. Though the leaders had a clear vision of how to connect with the community, there was no best way to do it. School governance issues stretched well beyond traditional school boundaries and toward greater interagency collaboration—a powerful means for understanding, interacting, and empowering different minority groups (Capper 1996).

Priority: Improving learning and teaching to address disadvantage.

High-quality learning and teaching were seen as necessary prerequisites for raising student self-esteem, achieving the school's mission, improving achievement scores, and widening pathways to battle racism and other inequalities.

Strategies

The principals implemented strategies to monitor or track performance by ethnicity, then to identify achievement patterns and, subsequently to plan and apply appropriate interventions. There did not appear, however, to be formal strategies to track shifts in attitudes (positive or negative) toward racism and other destructive attitudes.

> How to most effectively meet the needs of students from diverse cultural and ethnic minority backgrounds and their communities continues to be among the most serious and pressing issues facing educators worldwide.

The principals stressed the importance of teaching and learning in their schools and promoted the infusion of culture and cultural issues into the curriculum. They encouraged staff members to structure curricular experiences that reflected cultural diversity and to counter racism and other forms of discrimination. These, however, were mostly restricted to art and drama, and there seemed little direct acknowledgment of a cultural influence on learning styles. Of the priorities identified and the strategies implemented, efforts to address ethnic diversity in the classroom and its implications for teaching received the least attention.

Priority: Constructing and nurturing an inclusive school culture.

Inclusive school cultures were highly valued and seen as more important and more influential than technical systems or structures, though these aspects were seen as integral for facilitating inclusion.

Strategies

An inclusive school culture is one that reflects the ethnic and cultural diversity of the broader school community. Parks (1999, 4) defined an inclusive school culture as one "in which students from diverse racial, ethnic, and social groups believe that they are heard and valued and experience respect, belonging, and encouragement." To build and sustain an inclusive culture, the principals vigorously promoted the participation and representation of students, teachers, parents, and community groups. They established structures for this involvement, such as student councils, professional development days, prefect systems, and community-linked groups.

The principals celebrated ethnic diversity by encouraging reflection in student projects and by building the self-esteem of staff members, students, and others asso-

ciated with the school. They implemented supportive, influential, and easily under-stood structures and policies against racism, and established committees to promote inclusion and monitor change initiatives. Disrespecting people on ethnic or other discriminatory grounds was frowned upon and carried predetermined and defined consequences. Resource allocation was considered an important strategy, and the level of resources devoted to multicultural activities served as a benchmark for a school's commitment to this goal.

The principals rejected a one-size-fits-all framework, returning continually to the uniqueness of their environment (Henze 2000). Though they made considerable progress in their schools, they acknowledged shortcomings. Both personal and insti-tutionalized racism remained widespread, and academic underachievement contin-ued to plague their schools.

Leadership Challenges

The three major leadership challenges that emerged from the study are de-scribed here.

The challenge of seeing more than ethnicity. In addition to ethnicity, other con-textual factors are vital to building school and community capacity. These principals fought the assumption that ethnicity was at the root of all problems and, if addressed, the school would automatically become more successful. Other factors that had a major impact on student and school success included geographical location, history, local politics, and the stability of the school popula-tion. As one leader explained, "White students both inside and outside of school are cat-egorized in terms of social class, while students of color are categorized by ethnicity only, giving no consideration to economic and class distinc-tions. This presumes that all members of an easily identifi-able ethnic group hold the same values, beliefs, and predilections, or that ethnic homogeneity requires less ac-tive leadership and understanding. One African-American teacher in the United States stated about his colleagues (in Mabokela and Madsen 2003, 104), "Teachers here think I know everything about black children, but I never grew up in the city and never experienced the difficulties these students have had. Yet, the teachers expect me to have access to every black student, and I find that really troubling."

> These school leaders did not rest on the rhetoric of their values and beliefs, but expended considerable strategic and practical energy toward their realization—often in the face of daunting obstacles.

The number of different ethnic groups found in schools also is part of the challenge. These diverse groups often hold vastly different values and expectations, making it difficult to build a school where social justice not only is addressed, but addressed for all. There needs to be awareness that many differences exist within, as between, ethnic groups (Walker and Dimmock 2002).

All principals are charged with building meaningful links with the broader community and recognizing that their students' communities are important, even when they are geographically distant from the school. Principals continually are challenged to balance personal and organizational resources to pursue this connection. Structural inequities and inequalities, such as those associated with gender, ethnicity, and class, present major challenges to creating inclusive cultures. The goal is not only to build understanding of and respect for ethnicity and culture across all facets of school life, but also to ensure that schools are not constructed simply in terms of ethnicity or ethnic homogeneity.

The challenge of using culture to improve learning and teaching. Another important challenge is to make learning and teaching sensitive and responsive to ethnicity and culture. This study found that culture often was left at the classroom door and that its influence on learning and teaching was downplayed, sometimes because of central assessment requirements. School leaders must find ways to expand awareness of culture's place in learning and teaching while addressing the instrumental approaches demanded by accountability and assessment mechanisms.
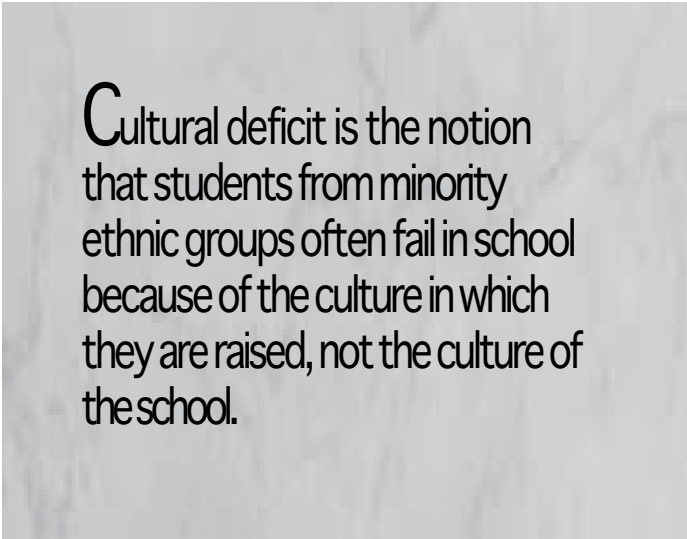
> The principals were proactive in anticipating future problems, needs, or changes based on what the school could do to equalize opportunities for students.

The academic achievement gap between majority and most minority students means that culturally biased approaches to teaching and learning must be challenged (Dimmock 2000). Cooper and Jordon (2003) noted (when discussing African-American male students) that minority students could be better served educationally when traditional notions of teaching and learning are reconsidered. Students' different cognitive strategies have implications not only for teachers, but also for school leaders in promoting good learning cultures and practices in schools.

Principals must find ways to support staff members when the demands for inclusion and improved results on public examinations conflict. To help teachers meet these contradictory requisitions, principals should provide a professional learning

program that helps teachers understand the influence of culture and ethnicity on learning and teaching and that provides instruction on designing programs and pedagogies which take culture and ethnicity into account. An example of culture-sensitive teaching strategies, or what Banks (1993, 198) referred to as "equity pedagogy," is provided by Rothstein-Fisch, Greenfield, and Trumbull (1999). These authors described the problems faced by many teachers in the United States who have Latino children from Central and South America in their classes. These immigrant children bring collectivist values to school, making it critical for teachers to understand the ramifications of those values in an otherwise individualist society. Collectivism emphasizes the interdependence of family members. Children are taught to be helpful to others and to contribute to the success and welfare of the group to which they belong—beginning with the family (Dimmock and Walker in press; Walker 2004a). American, Australian, and British schools tend to foster individualism—viewing the child as an individual who needs to develop independence and value individual achievement. Collectivism emphasizes the social context of learning and knowledge, while individualism emphasizes information disengaged from its social context.

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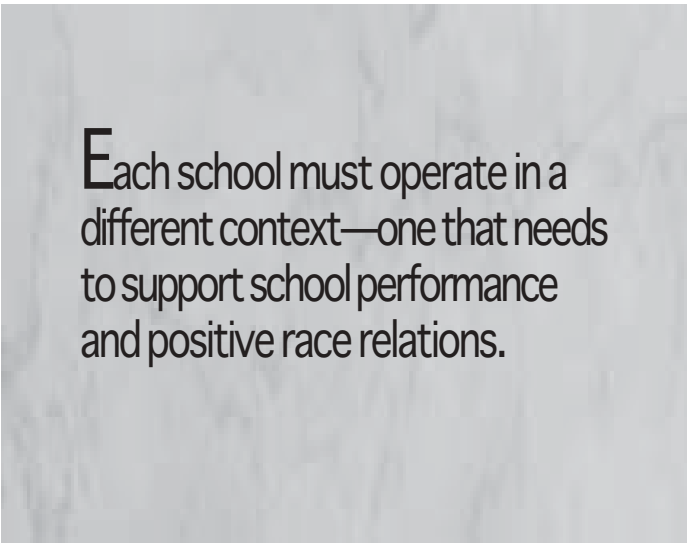
The principal's task is to help teachers—of all ethnicities—to realize that their own practices are cultural in origin and not the only way to do things. Research in the United States showed that teachers were capable of modifying their pedagogical practices in response to cultural differences (Mabokela and Madsen 2003). Principals must encourage teachers to view these cultural differences as opportunities to expand their knowledge of learning styles, their repertoire of teaching techniques, and classroom management practice and curriculum tailoring skills.

The challenge of parallel staffing. One of the principals' major priorities was to match the ethnic profile of staff members to that of students, which is not as simple as making the profiles of the two groups equal. Though having suitable numbers of teachers with the same ethnic origins as the students is important (Blair et al. 1998), research in the United States showed that token representation of minorities tended to highlight their visibility within the organization. Mabokela and Madsen (2003) found that such visibility can lead to the marginalization of minority staff members. In their study of African-American teachers, Mabokela and Madsen (2003) found that by increasing their interaction with European-American teachers on pedagogi-

cal and management strategies, negative stereotypes about children of color and insider-outsider status were debunked. Minority teachers (Mabokela and Madsen 2003, 102) were seen as "insiders who provided insights about students of color," but "were treated as outsiders whose narrowly defined African-American expertise resulted in their being isolated and unable to attain informal social power." This experience made evident that principals should try to hire more minority teachers and make sure that those already employed feel valued for more than their cultural knowledge and connection.

Other challenges also are noteworthy. First, principals must develop school cultures where individuality, especially that of minority teachers, is as valued as their association with a particular ethnic group. Second, principals also must know how to help minority educators prepare for formal leadership positions within the school and the broader educational system. The third and perhaps most difficult challenge is determining whether teacher effectiveness or membership in a certain ethnic group is more important for a school. Cooper and Jordan (2003, 391) claimed, "Though an effective teacher of any racial background is more preferable for black male students than an ineffective teacher of African-American descent," the latter may have potential for raising success rates based on successful role modeling, use of shared knowledge, and shared social experiences. The solution is not as straightforward as achieving cultural synchronization. Progress in matching ethnic mixes between teachers and students may depend on teacher and leader preparation programs and affirmative professional learning opportunities.

> Each school must operate in a different context—one that needs to support school performance and positive race relations.

Conclusion

Despite considerable and complex challenges, all of the principals involved in the study approached their jobs in a positive, proactive manner. Their actions were firmly grounded in strong personal values focused on social justice issues, such as racism and interethnic tension. They saw a strong link between social disadvantage and ethnicity, and believed issues such as racism and academic achievement were intractably interrelated. They were driven to create school communities that reflected the socially just macro-society in which they believed. Based on their values and propensity toward action, the principals shared a set of priorities. These targeted the inculcation of a set of values and beliefs that centered on school ethnic minorities and on building an inclusive school culture. The priorities were implemented through

a wide range of formal and informal strategies, the combination of which varied between principals depending on the ethnic and other contextual features of their school communities. Within schools, however, strategies generally were coherent and avoided what Henze (2000) called a hodgepodge of unrelated approaches aimed at melding activities into a total effect that somehow exceeded the sum of their parts.

Despite their concerted attempts to address disadvantage and its influence on schools, the principals faced many challenges and continue to so do. Among the more intractable challenges is the influence of culture on learning. Another challenge is creating learning opportunities that drive success in multiethnic schools. Each principal stressed that there are no simple recipes for successfully leading a multiethnic school. Each school must operate in a different context—one that needs to support school performance and positive race relations. The principals worked in environments that both excited and frustrated them. Their aim was to advance the school, redress the disadvantages associated with ethnicity and class, and in the process, improve the lot and place of all their students.

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